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INDIGENOUS FILMS

Series Editors

Randolph Lewis

David Delgado Shorter

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The Fast Runner: Filming the Legend of Atanarjuat

MICHAEL ROBERT EVANS

UNIVERSITY OF NEBRASKA PRESS | LINCOLN AND LONDON

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Set in Minion by Kim Essman.
Designed by Nathan Putens.

*To Joanna, Dylan,
and Miles Evans,
my inspirational family,
and to Henry Glassie,
my inspirational mentor*

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NOTE

I have previously published a book about Igloolik Isuma Productions, titled *Isuma: Inuit Video Art*. That book, published by McGill–Queens University Press, includes a chapter on *The Fast Runner*. It also contains material about the people of Isuma and other facets important to this story. While the writing for this book is original, some of the information is necessarily similar to the information in *Isuma: Inuit Video Art*.

Also, *The Fast Runner* was shot in digital format and then converted to film for distribution. It was then released again in digital formats, including DVD, for home viewing. So, despite the distinct and significant differences between film and video technologies, in what follows I refer to *The Fast Runner* and other Isuma products as “films,” “movies,” or “videos” fairly interchangeably.

Finally, I should point out that the English-alphabet spelling of Inuit words and names varies widely. When quoting material from printed sources, I have kept the spelling used by those sources, even when that spelling varies from other uses elsewhere in the book.

SERIES EDITORS' INTRODUCTION

Randolph Lewis, David Delgado Shorter

We are proud to have Michael Evans's "*The Fast Runner*": *Filming the Legend of Atanarjuat* as the first entry in the new book series, Indigenous Films. For the past three years we have sought out scholars we consider uniquely qualified to write about a particular film as a portal to the Native culture it depicts. The series will feature concise books on individual Native films, including *The Fast Runner*, *Whale Rider*, *Dances with Wolves*, *Black Robe*, *Smoke Signals*, *Apocalypto*, *Little Big Man*, *Navajo Talking Picture*, *Pocahontas*, and other films made by or about indigenous people. Each book in the series will provide an affordable and accessible companion to an important film that is often taught in history, anthropology, folklore, or Native American studies but for which there are few existing supporting materials or companion pieces to help instructors and students access the key issues in the film. We want each book to be written in an accessible manner and to examine the film from a number of angles that should stimulate classroom discussion, but also to engage a larger critical conversation about the power and potential of indigenous media. Our ultimate goal is to challenge the Eurocentrism that often afflicts the study of cinema, and to initiate conversations about the promises and challenges of indigenous media now emerging around the globe.

The Fast Runner is an ideal place to begin. Along with *Smoke Signals*, *The Fast Runner* remains one of the key texts in the burgeoning field of indigenous media. We believe that this extraordinary film represents a breakthrough in terms of autonomous production, aesthetic ambition, and critical reception. How many films have received rave reviews from Margaret Atwood ("like Homer with a video camera"), Claude Lévi-Strauss, Jacques Chirac, and Roger Ebert? *The Fast Runner* is unusual in attracting the attention of novelists, scholars, politicians, and general film audiences, all of whom seem to view it as a watershed moment in the history of indigenous filmmaking, not simply for Inuit people but for Native

film in the broadest sense. Almost every major reviewer fawned over it and what it seemingly represents: an epic film that artfully married the latest in video technology with the traditional storytelling of the Inuit. Reading Michael Evans's book confirmed our sense that *The Fast Runner* is one of the most significant films yet produced by indigenous filmmakers.

Beyond its role as a touchstone for Native film, *The Fast Runner* also has great significance to Canadian media: it led Canadian films at the box office in 2002, and has since been selected as one of the top ten Canadian films of all time. Clearly, a great deal can be said about this film. The relationship between *The Fast Runner* and its represented subject, Inuit culture, is worthy of much discussion across a wide range of academic disciplines, including Canadian studies, visual anthropology, ethnohistory, film studies, indigenous studies, and religious studies.

We encouraged Michael Evans to write this book after reading his earlier work on indigenous media. We believed he was ideally positioned to do so: almost no one else has the ethnographic experience with Inuit media that he has acquired (he lived there for the better part of a year, working with the Inuit Broadcasting Corporation). Almost no one else has thought about Inuit media and their role in Inuit culture in the folkloric way that he has. Based on extensive research and personal connections in the Arctic, as well as a wealth of cultural knowledge and considerable sensitivity, his book is a uniquely well-informed, thoughtful, and illuminating look at Inuit creativity in the age of electronic media. Evans shows how *The Fast Runner's* producers, Zacharias Kunuk and Norman Cohn, handled their complex intercultural collaboration with extraordinary skill, resulting in a film that can serve as a model of autonomous media production for indigenous people.

One of our goals for this series was to encourage teachers to use more Native film in the classroom. With its short chapters and clear prose style, Michael Evans's book strikes an appropriate balance between scholarly depth and narrative flow, making it both teachable in the undergraduate classroom and readable by the nonspecialist.

Anyone interested in the intricacies of a great story — and the legend of Atanarjuat certainly qualifies — will enjoy this book.

As editors of the Indigenous Films book series, we are proud to have this work as the starting point in what we hope will be a long and fruitful conversation about the beauty and power of indigenous media.

INTRODUCTION

Follow the western shore of Hudson Bay northward until the wide expanse of water crimps into a sliver of the Arctic Ocean called the Fury and Hecla Strait. The island looming to the north and east — the fifth-largest island in the world — is Baffin Island, home to caribou herds and Inuit villages and Iqaluit, the capital of the new Canadian territory of Nunavut. Tucked between Baffin Island and the mainland is a much smaller island, shaped like a cracked stone. This is Igloolik Island, and hugging one side of the bay that nearly splits it is the Inuit community of Igloolik, “place of houses.”

From the village, a short ride by all-terrain vehicle around the hook of Turton Bay brings you to a stone — rectangular, reddish brown, covered with bird droppings. This stone offers a pleasant place to sit and gaze across the expanse of rocky beach toward the small waves of the sheltered bay. It was on this rock that a young man named Atanarjuat sat, centuries ago, to wait for the whales he had hunted to drift up on shore.

According to a legend still told in the Arctic, Atanarjuat and his brother were attacked one day by rivals who were jealous of their skill and popularity. The rivals knocked down the brothers’ tent and stabbed their spears through the fabric, killing the brother. Atanarjuat managed to escape, however, and he fled — totally naked — across the frozen ocean. The rivals pursued him, intent on murder. But Atanarjuat was endowed with extraordinary foot speed and was able to stay ahead of them, even though the cold sapped his strength and the ice slashed his feet. Ultimately, Atanarjuat escaped his pursuers and was nursed back to health by a family on a distant island. Once he was strong enough, he returned to Igloolik and exacted revenge on his rivals.

Legends such as this one infuse Inuit culture with interpretations of events, lessons about morality and social responsibility, and ideas about how to live and thrive in the Arctic. But most of the world knows about the Inuit not through their legends and stories but

through southern depictions of life in the North — portrayals that often position the Inuit not as wise and resourceful but as savage and primitive. Or backward and unable to adapt to the changing world. Or silly and happy-go-lucky. Or irrelevant and essentially nonexistent. In the face of these depictions in literature and film, increasing numbers of Inuit artists are offering counterpoints that show the richness, depth, and genius inherent in Inuit culture. One such group is Igloolik Isuma Productions, and its most influential film so far is based on the Atanarjuat legend.

Released in 2001, *The Fast Runner* is the first feature-length film written, directed, and produced by Inuit moviemakers, and one of the most important indigenous films ever made.¹ It has had a profound impact in several spheres: Inuit moviemaking, life in Igloolik, the understanding and appreciation of Inuit life and perspectives worldwide.

The Fast Runner represents a significant leap for Isuma, but it rests on a solid body of previous work. The group and its primary producer, Zacharias Kunuk, began with short pieces about traditional Inuit life and perspectives; some of the early pieces were scripted, but others were done in a more documentary style. After an initial string of interesting and innovative videos, the organization focused on the creation of the Nunavut series, thirteen videos showing Inuit approaches to dogsledding, seal hunting, and other activities. Isuma produced a few more videos, taking various approaches to issues involving life in the North, while arranging the funding for their ambitious *Fast Runner* project.

The success of *The Fast Runner* contributed to the reputation of Igloolik in the realm of Inuit videography. Three video groups are active in the community: Igloolik Isuma Productions, the Tariagsuk Video Centre (a community video organization), and a cultural-programming branch of the Inuit Broadcasting Corporation. All three groups have been creating movies for more than two decades, but the international success of *The Fast Runner* brought newfound attention and respect to Isuma's work in particular and Inuit videography in general.

The core of Isuma comprises two men: Zacharias Kunuk and Norman Cohn. Kunuk has lived in the Igloolik area his whole life, and in addition to producing videos he is also a skilled carver and storyteller. Born in an outpost camp on the edge of the Arctic Ocean, he was taken from his family while still a boy and enrolled in a boarding school. He was eventually reunited with his family, which moved into permanent settlement in the village of Igloolik. Kunuk's first language is Inuktitut, although he speaks fluent English with a deliberate pace and distinctive accent. He lives with his wife and children in a simple house on the western side of town.

Cohn is not Inuit. He is a Caucasian video artist from southern Canada, and he met Kunuk when he led a video training session sponsored by the Inuit Broadcasting Corporation. He splits his time between Igloolik and Montreal, where Isuma has an increasingly strong presence. His role as the only non-Inuk in the Isuma organization raises interesting questions about identity and perspective that I discuss later in this book.

For decades, the world has been aware of the grace and power of Inuit sculpture and printmaking; with the global success of *The Fast Runner*, people are awakening to the artistry, the depth, and the perspectives of Inuit films. *The Fast Runner* has been shown in dozens of countries, earning awards at a host of film and video festivals. Perhaps the most prestigious is the Camera d'Or Award, presented to Kunuk at the 2001 Cannes Film Festival; the award is given to the best work by a new director. Other international awards garnered by *The Fast Runner* include the Guardian Award for Best New Director (co-winner) at the Edinburgh International Film Festival, the Grand Prix of the Flemish Community Award for Best Film at the Flanders International Film Festival, and the Best Feature Film Award at both the Santa Fe International Festival and the San Diego International Film Festival.

The movie has earned numerous Canadian awards as well, including the Best Canadian Feature Film Award at the Toronto International Film Festival, the Special Jury Prize and the Prix du Public at the Festival International du Nouveau Cinema et des Nouveaux

Medias de Montreal, and five Genie Awards (the Canadian equivalent of the Oscars), for Best Picture, Best Director, Best Screenplay, Best Original Score, and Best Editing. For many of these awards, including the Cannes and Genie awards, Kunuk gave his acceptance speech in Inuktitut, the language of the Inuit and the language of the film.

The Fast Runner received praise from prominent reviewers, including A. O. Scott in the *New York Times*, Jim Hoberman in the *Village Voice*, Margaret Atwood in the *Globe and Mail*, and Roger Ebert in the *Chicago Sun-Times*, among many others. Jacques Chirac, then president of France, added his praise for the film as well.

And the admiration for *The Fast Runner* goes beyond the popular and the political. Anthropologist Claude Lévi-Strauss wrote that the film offers

superb landscapes, admirably photographed, which, for long moments, carry the spectator off to this “other world.” . . . I was also captivated by many ethnographic details and by the human realness of the characters. It is exciting to see Inuit people reconstitute themselves from an emotionally moving legend — the framework of their traditional life, the daily tasks, and the life events. (Igloolik Isuma Productions, 2002, 9)

The Fast Runner is a complex movie — watching the three-hour film in which nothing but Inuktitut is spoken requires active engagement by the audience — and its role in Inuit life and the presentation of Inuit culture to the world is far-reaching and profound. Producer Zacharias Kunuk put it this way:

Atanarjuat wasn’t the only legend we heard but it was one of the best — once you get that picture into your head of that naked man running for his life across the ice, his hair flying, you never forget it. It had everything in it for a fantastic movie — love, jealousy, murder and revenge, and at the same time, buried in this ancient Inuit “action thriller,” were all these lessons we kids were supposed to learn about how if you break these taboos that

kept our ancestors alive, you could be out there running for *your* life just like him! (Igloodik Isuma Productions, 2002, 13)

I was drawn to the Arctic out of a love for Inuit art and culture, including videos and film. I spent nine months with Isuma, during the creation of *The Fast Runner*, and myriad hours talking with Kunuk and the other producers and viewing Isuma's body of videos. Ultimately, I wrote my doctoral dissertation on the work of Isuma and the other video organizations in Igloodik, and I now teach journalism at Indiana University and focus my research on indigenous media. In particular, I explore how indigenous artists express their culture through the externally developed media of newspapers, magazines, radio and television programs, and videos.

In this book, I offer some keys to help unlock the multiple facets of this intricate and historic movie. I describe the plot, which can be hard to follow at times, and I set the film in its cultural, social and historical contexts. I also explain some of the choices made by the producers, including their decision to change the usual ending of the legend to create a more pointed conclusion to the film. The goal of this book is a deeper and clearer understanding of — and appreciation for — this groundbreaking film.

CHARACTERS

ATANARJUAUAT’S FAMILY

Tulimaq, father of Atanarjuat and Aamarjuaq.

Pitaaluk, Tulimaq’s wife and mother of Atanarjuat and Aamarjuaq.

Aamarjuaq, son of Tulimaq and Pitaaluk and Atanarjuat’s older brother.

Atanarjuat, the central figure of the film and legend.

Kumaglak, son of Atanarjuat and Atuat.

UQI’S FAMILY

Kumaglak, the camp leader at the start of the film. A powerful shaman.

Panikpak, Kumaglak’s wife. Also a shaman.

Sauri, son of Kumaglak and Panikpak. He ushers in the evil shaman that disrupts the camp’s harmony.

Kukilasak, Sauri’s wife.

Uqi, son of Sauri and Kukilasak. He murders his father to become camp leader.

Puja, daughter of Sauri and Kukilasak (hence Uqi’s sister). She seduces Atanarjut, becomes his wife, then betrays him.

The characters in *The Fast Runner* are numerous and sometimes difficult to keep straight. One particular challenge in the film is that the beloved camp leader Kumaglak was the father of the evil Sauri, so that family went from “good” to “bad” in the course of one generation. This chart organizes the characters by family and lists them by generation. The main characters are listed in boldface.

QULITALIK’S FAMILY

Qulitalik, older brother of Panikpak. A powerful shaman.

Niriuniq, Qulitalik’s wife.

Kigutikarjuk, adopted daughter of Qulitalik and Niriuniq.

ATUAT’S FAMILY

Utuqiaq, Atuat’s father.

Sakku, Atuat’s mother.

Atuat, daughter of Utuqiaq and Sakku. Promised to Uqi as a child, she falls in love with Atanarjuat.

OTHERS

Tuurngarjuaq, an evil shaman. Invited into the camp by Sauri, he brings trouble with him.

Asa, Ulluriaq’s mother.

Sigluk, Ulluriaq’s father

Ulluriaq, Aamarjuaq’s wife.

Pakak, one of Uqi’s sidekicks.

Pittiulaq, one of Uqi’s sidekicks.

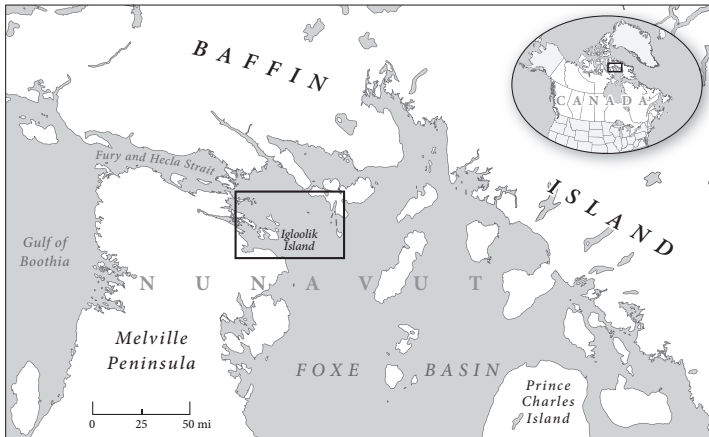
Qillaq, father of Uqi’s and Pittiulak’s wives.

PRONUNCIATION OF NAMES

Aamarjuaq	ah-MAR-joo-ahk
Asa	AH-sah
Atanarjuat	ah-tah-NAR-joo-aht
Atuat	AH-tuat
Kigutikarjuk	kee-goo-tee-KAR-jook
Kukilasak	koo-KEE-luh-sock
Kumaglak	koo-MUG-luck
Niriuniq	nee-ree-YOO-nirk
Pakak	PAH-kahk
Panikpak	PAH-nick-pahk
Pitaaluk	pee-TAH-look
Pittiulaq	pit-tee-YOO-lahk
Puja	POO-yah
Qulitalik	khoo-LIT-tah-lick
Qillaq	KHEED-lahk
Sakku	SOCK-koo
Sauri	SAOW-ree
Sigluk	SEEG-look
Tulimaq	too-lee-MAHK
Tuurngarjuaq	toong-GAHR-joo-ahk
Ulluriaq	oo-DLOO-ree-yahk
Uqi	oo-khee
Utuqiaq	oo-TOO-khee-yahk

THE FAST RUNNER

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Igloolik, which is both the setting for *The Fast Runner* and Isuma's base of operations, is a small island between mainland Canada and Baffin Island. The hamlet of Igloolik occupies one side of Turton Bay, which cuts deeply into Igloolik Island. Sioraq, the island to which Atanarjuat ran while being chased by his attackers, lies a short distance to the east.